

Kierkegaard's Ethicist: Fichte's Role in Kierkegaard's Construction of the Ethical Standpoint

by Michelle Kosch (Ann Arbor)

Abstract: I argue that Fichte (rather than Kant or Hegel or some amalgam of the two) was the primary historical model for the ethical standpoint described in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* II. I then explain how looking at Kierkegaard's texts with Fichte in mind helps in interpreting the criticism of the ethical standpoint in works like *The Sickness unto Death* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, as well as the significance of the discussion of secular ethics in *Fear and Trembling*. I conclude with a brief look at the relevance for contemporary Kantian ethics of Kierkegaard's characterization and his criticism.

I take it that one task of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works is to examine a set of life-views (falling into three main categories – “aesthetic”, “ethical” and “religious”) with the aim of showing how they look from the inside, to a person trying to understand himself and his activity in the terms they provide, and with the further aim of showing the various ways in which they fail as schemes for organizing or understanding one's existence. We are aided in the imaginary trying-on of the different life views by a series of pseudonyms who inhabit them, or try but fail to inhabit them. What he calls the “ethical” standpoint is one of the ones subjected to this test, and Kierkegaard characterizes it from two directions in his pseudonymous works. The most elaborate discussion of it is given through a pseudonym who endorses it and claims to live it (Judge Wilhelm, the author of the second volume of *Either/Or* and parts of *Stages on Life's Way*); other pseudonyms (in such later works as *The Sickness unto Death*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, and parts of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) contend that no coherent life can be organized around the life-view the Judge endorses.

I also take it that we are not to see these life-views as arbitrary inventions of Kierkegaard's. The criticisms are made by and aimed at fictional figures, but those figures themselves are supposed to embody attitudes and opinions with some currency in mid-nineteenth century Copenhagen. So it is reasonable to ask who the model is for Kierkegaard's ethicist, who the target of his criticisms. This interpretive task is not trivial. The Judge claims no model and the other pseudonyms' criticisms name a list of historical figures as diverse as Kant and Socrates alleged to have advanced the ethical view they find problematic. Standard interpretations have the Judge's view as an amalgam of bits of Kant and Hegel (with some other things thrown in). Here I argue that Fichte was in fact the main historical model for Kierkegaard's ethicist,¹ and explain how looking at Kierkegaard's texts with Fichte in mind helps us to understand not only the positive characterization of the ethical standpoint in works like *Either/Or* (§§ I & II), but also the criticism of it in works like *The Sickness unto Death* (§ III) and the significance of the discussion of secular ethics in *Fear and Trembling* (§ IV). This reading offers solutions to some interpretive puzzles, but I hope it does more than that. I hope that seeing Kierkegaard's ethicist as an actual historical interlocutor rather than a straw man will encourage us to take his criticisms more seriously than we otherwise might. I conclude with some thoughts on the relevance for contemporary ethics of Kierkegaard's characterization and his criticism.

¹ I concentrate on Fichte's 1798 *System der Sittenlehre* in what follows, since this version became the canonical one, and since the differences between it and the 1812 version at some key points were substantial. The copy of the 1798 *Sittenlehre* in Kierkegaard's library at the time of his death was the version in the collected works edited by Fichte's son (which did not appear until 1845/6). The copy of the 1812 version in the library catalogue is from the three-volume edition of Fichte's *Nachlass*, also edited by Fichte's son, which appeared in 1834-35. But since there is no reason to suppose Kierkegaard did not have access to an earlier edition of the *Sittenlehre* of 1798 (indeed no reason to suppose he did not himself own one, even if he did not die with one in his possession), I see no problem in using this version as the primary reference. All translations from Fichte are mine.

§ I. *Fichte's Place in Either/Or*

“The ethical” means a number of different things in *Either/Or*. For my purposes here it is helpful to distinguish two senses, one broader and one narrower.² The ethical standpoint in the broader sense is just the willingness to think practically in terms of value categories that are “moralized” in one sense to which Nietzsche called our attention: they entail that the differential values instantiated by actions (or decisions or dispositions) are so instantiated only if the actions (etc.) arose as a result of the agent’s free will. To take the ethical stance in this broader sense is to take oneself to be a morally responsible agent: what one does is not only better or worse according to some set of criteria, but is also a product of one’s free choice.³ The religious standpoints are also ethical in this broader sense, and it is not against the ethical standpoint in this broader sense that the complaints in later pseudonymous works are directed.⁴ The ethical standpoint in the narrower sense adds a further set of commitments about the source and specific character of conduct-guiding norms to those of ethics in the broader sense, and it is those additional commitments that are the object of criticism. These are, as I have argued elsewhere⁵ and will explain in § II, the

² I call these senses “broader” and “narrower” because on Kierkegaard’s view the extension of the latter is a proper subset of that of the former. Note, though, that this broader/narrower distinction is unrelated to the more familiar distinction bearing the same name.

³ To take up the ethical standpoint then is to substitute *either* the properly ethical categories “good” and “evil” *or* their religious successor categories “sin” and “faith” for the non-moralized, aesthetic categories “pleasant”/“unpleasant”, “beautiful”/“ugly”, or “interesting”/“boring”. I have argued elsewhere for this view of ethics in a general sense in Kierkegaard.

⁴ One might think to object to this characterization by pointing out the role of grace in Kierkegaard’s account of faith precludes that the Christian religious view he endorses is “ethical” in this sense. The role of the will in faith on Kierkegaard’s account is a topic of some debate; what is not controversial, though, is the role of the will in sin, and I believe this is all the characterization requires. I say more about this in chapter 6 of Kosch 2006b.

⁵ Kosch 2006b, chapter 5.

characteristic commitments of the ethics of autonomy.⁶ Coupled with the assumption that the view is modeled on some one or more existing views with a high mid-19th century profile, this yields Kant, Fichte and Hegel as possible models. Since there was quite a bit of agreement amongst these three, establishing who was the primary model will be a matter of saying where in the space of disagreement among them the Judge's characterization of the ethical standpoint falls.

The ethical view the Judge presents in *Either/Or*, though it agrees with Kant's account of the foundations of ethics, departs substantially from Kant's accounts of the content of moral duties and the nature of moral reasoning. First, the scope of ethical duties the Judge countenances is too wide by Kantian criteria (for example, the duty to marry, discussion of which is so prominent in *Either/Or* II, is not an ethical duty at all on Kant's view). Second, the Judge's account of conscience and his injunction to appropriate one's concrete situation ethically depart in a way that is subtle but fundamental from Kant's account of moral judgment. (I will discuss these divergences at some length later in this section. The second will be more important than the first.)

What about Hegel? Much of the "aesthetic defense of marriage" advanced in the first letter of *Either/Or* II (and indeed the very idea of such a defense) looks basically Hegelian, as does the Judge's idea that what concrete duties one has will depend on what the features of one's society turn out to be. But in *Either/Or* one finds no trace of Hegel's antipathy to the ethics of conscience (of which Kierkegaard was certainly aware,⁷ and which I will examine more closely below). Nor is there any trace of the emphasis on *de facto* social norms as ultimate arbiter of duty from the individual agent's standpoint⁸ that characterizes Hegel's conception of *Sittlichkeit*. Nor, finally does the Judge share Hegel's

⁶ In fact, the Judge argues on behalf of ethics in both broader and narrower senses in *Either/Or* II, and so on behalf of both the commitment to moral responsibility and the commitment to autonomy as the foundation of ethics, but the cases are separable and only the second concerns me here.

⁷ He cites the relevant sections of the *Philosophy of Right* both in his dissertation *On the Concept of Irony* and in *Fear and Trembling*.

⁸ I make a distinction **here** between agent's and philosopher's standpoints **here** because I take it that for Hegel social norms are the ultimate arbiter of duty for the individual in the agent situation, even if we are further able to reflect on the justification of those norms for purposes other than deciding what is the right thing to do here and now – say, for purposes of doing political theory. Thanks to Fred Neuhausser for pressing me to clarify this.

account of the sort of justification to which the authority of those social norms is subject from the philosophical standpoint:⁹ the thesis that reason is actualized in modern society. The unification of an ethics of custom with the demands of rational autonomy depends on the metaphysics of world-spirit and the interpretation of world-history Hegel gave – at least on Kierkegaard's understanding of Hegel.¹⁰ But the second letter of *Either/Or* II contains criticisms directed at that very account, to the effect it commits one to a form of fatalism and so is at odds with the demands of ethics in the broader sense (with the “either/or” of freedom of choice).¹¹ So Hegel is not a good match for the positive characterization of ethics given in *Either/Or* II.

Equally significant is the fact that the criticisms directed at Hegel and those directed at the ethical standpoint in later pseudonymous works do not line up. We are meant to take the view criticized by later pseudonyms as the very view presented in *Either/Or*. But where the ethical standpoint is criticized in those later works, it is never criticized on the grounds that it relies on suspect historical or metaphysical claims.¹² On the other hand, the criticisms directed explicitly at Hegel (not only in later works, but also in *Either/Or* itself) are generally to the effect that Hegel had no ethics or that he tried to substitute a metaphysics or a philosophy of history for an ethics.¹³ There are, then, good reasons to

⁹ See the foregoing footnote for the agent standpoint/philosophical standpoint distinction.

¹⁰ This view of the status of the claims of *Sittlichkeit* has been contested, and I have a lot of sympathy for the reconstruction, shorn of metaphysically questionable trappings, of *Sittlichkeit* given by Neuhauser 2000. However, Kierkegaard did not have this reconstruction on hand, and it is clear that his conception of the source of the normativity of ethical claims in Hegel's view was more in line with one like that in Taylor 1975 (which itself is more in line with 19th century readings of Hegel).

¹¹ See especially Kierkegaard 1987, 170 ff. (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 154 ff.) for the Judge's discussion of the tension between the metaphysical and the historical standpoints on the one hand and the standpoint of ethics on the other.

¹² They are, as I explain in § II, directed at the improbable moral psychology of the theories in question.

¹³ In the journals one finds expressed at various point the thought that the metaphysical and ethical standpoints are fundamentally at odds, and that Hegel has (and can have) no ethics because he takes the metaphysical standpoint (see e.g. Kierkegaard 1909-1978, V B 41, p. 96; VII, 1 A 153; VII, 2 B 235 p. 162; VII 2 B 261, 24; VIII, 2 B 86 p. 171). Some of the comments in the published work are to the effect that ethics is missing from “the system” – with no specific reference to Hegel (cf. Kierkegaard 1987, 321 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 288) and Kierkegaard 1988, 231 and 446 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, VI 218, 416). But there can be no doubt that Hegel is meant. Climacus, who makes it clear that the system under discussion is Hegel's and that it

think Hegel's conception of ethics is neither the Judge's model nor the later pseudonyms' target. (There is one apparent exception to the generality of this claim, which I will discuss in § IV with the aim of showing that it is not in fact an exception.)

Fichte's account is a better fit in important ways.¹⁴ Fichte's emphasis on the primacy of the practical standpoint and the dependent status accorded to theoretical reason is a deep point of agreement between Kierkegaard and Fichte; I see it as well-established and will not argue for it here.¹⁵ Further, Fichte's account of moral judgment and his emphasis on the role of

indeed, in his view, lacks an ethics (see Kierkegaard 1992, 307n, 338 = Kierkegaard 1901-1906, VII 263n, 293), even clarifies the referent of one of the earlier comments (probably that in *Stages on Life's Way*): "certainly everyone will perceive that what another author has observed regarding the Hegelian system is entirely in order: that through Hegel a system, the absolute system, was brought to completion – without having an ethics" (Kierkegaard 1992, 119 = Kierkegaard 1901-1906 VII 98).

¹⁴ The claim that Fichte was a model for the ethical view presented in *Either/Or* is not unprecedented. Emmanuel Hirsch suggests a role for Fichte in his commentary on *Either/Or* (Kierkegaard 1957-64) and Helmut Fahrenbach (1968) places Fichte in the background of Kierkegaard's "existential-dialectical ethics", though not in the way that I do in what follows. Neither of these studies has been absorbed into the English-language literature, and more recent German studies overlook Fichte's role and focus almost exclusively on Kant. On the whole the extent of Kierkegaard's debt to Fichte has been deeply underestimated. This is a surprising fact, given Fichte's stature in the first half of the 19th century, as well as his presence in Kierkegaard's library (see Rohde 1967).

¹⁵ While the very first formulation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* (arguably) leaves this question open, later formulations, as well as the *Grundlage des Naturrechts* and the *Sittenlehre* of 1798 assert that even the claims that the I posits itself absolutely (in the first instance) and (in the second instance) posits itself as finite agent together with a world of objects is a practical claim with a practical justification. There is no metaphysics (construed as a theoretical science) upon which Fichte's ethics depends; rather, ethical concerns motivate the basic structure of the system. Some view the primacy of the practical in Fichte's post-1795 writings as a change of mind brought on by the criticisms of Novalis and others of Fichte's first presentation of the *WL* at Jena (for a discussion of this view see e.g. Frank 1997). Others see no evidence for a change of mind (see e.g. Wood 2000), and still others conclude that since the first presentation of the *WL* was never completed, this issue is unresolvable (see e.g. Zöllner 1998b). Fahrenbach (1968: 165) sees Kierkegaard's "existential" starting point as a modification of Fichte's commitment to the primacy of the practical.

individual conscience as arbiter of duty is distinct from both Hegel's and Kant's views, but is consistent with the Judge's. Finally, the Judge's discussions of the ethical duty of marriage and of the nature of moral evil echo Fichte's in a quite remarkable way (and the views they express are distinct in the first case from Kant's and in the second from both Hegel's and Kant's). In the remainder of this section I will expand upon the second and third sets of points.

First, there are two closely related points about the nature of moral judgment and the authority of individual conscience that I find easier to approach separately but that both Fichte and the Judge seem to think of them as one (complex) point about the nature of practical deliberation. They are: 1) the claim that duty is always situation specific, and that one's concrete situation has priority over abstract principles in the determination of one's duty; and 2) the claim that, although duty should be discussable and ultimately an object of inter-subjective agreement, subjective conviction (rather than social consensus or any other sort of external authority) is the final arbiter of duty. The first is a disagreement with Kant about how moral judgment works; the second is a point about the moral authority of the individual as opposed to the collective with which Hegel will later disagree. Judge Wilhelm agrees with Fichte on both counts, and his agreement is especially significant, since telling *A how* one lives an ethical life is central to his project in *Either/Or* II. That is impossible without some account of practical deliberation, but the account offered in the text is sketchy (at best), and supplementing it with Kantian or Hegelian assumptions does not yield a coherent picture. This is a major interpretive gap that appeal to Fichte (and, apparently, *only* appeal to Fichte) can close.

Ad 1) In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant distinguishes two forms of judgment: determining judgment, which puts a given particular under a "rule, principle, [or] law" of which we are already in possession, and reflecting judgment, which extracts a universal (rule, principle, law) from a group of given particulars. Kant's description of moral conscience has it exercising *determining* judgment. For instance, in the discussion of conscience in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant describes its operation as deciding

whether a case falls under a rule that we already have.¹⁶ Maxims are generated by reflection on one's situation and one's desires (and background beliefs); they are then tested for permissibility according to a rule of which we are already in possession (the categorical imperative test). Fichte was disturbed by the limited role the moral principle has to play in the generation of maxims to be tested; this seemed to him to leave the agent's ends (even fairly fundamental ones) arbitrary within the set that can be incorporated into maxims that pass the test.¹⁷ Since Fichte also thought that not much was ruled out by the categorical imperative test as Kant described it, this seemed to him like a serious problem.¹⁸

In his own discussion of conscience, Fichte appeals to Kant's notion of *reflecting* judgment.¹⁹ On his account, a substantive moral end (which he describes as material self-determination²⁰) is coupled with beliefs about one's particular circumstances (specific

¹⁶ See Kant 1996a, 560 (Kant 1968, 6: 438).

¹⁷ Of course Kant does talk about ends (specifically, one's own perfection and the happiness of others) being prescribed by the moral law when he distinguishes duties of virtue from duties of right in the *Doctrine of Virtue*. (See the opening discussion, 6: 380 ff.). Allen Wood tells us that that Fichte was not familiar with this discussion when he composed the *Sittenlehre* (see Wood forthcoming, section 1). But the plausibility of Fichte's complaint is not dependent on ignorance of that discussion, since the Kantian account of the moral ends is itself derived from the presumption of a *de facto* universal end (happiness) which is not set by practical reason and is not on its own a source of moral imperatives, coupled with a version of the categorical imperative test. Fichte is correct to say that for Kant ethics has no substantive ends of its own; Kant himself argues that it is impossible for it to have them (e.g. at Kant 1996a, 167 = Kant 1968 5: 34). This does mean that for Kant, practical reason does not recommend one unique course of action in most situations.

¹⁸ Both of these criticisms of Kantian ethics are familiar from Hegel, but they originated with Fichte. For a discussion of Hegel's version of them, see Wood 1990, chapter 9.

¹⁹ At Fichte 1971, IV 165.

²⁰ By "material self-determination" Fichte means total independence of rational agency from anything foreign to it. He describes the moral end as a state in which one would stand in relation to the world in something like the way one stands in relation to one's body: "Independence, our final end, consists (as has often been pointed out) in the dependence of everything on me, and my not depending on anything – that everything in my sensible world happens because I will it absolutely and solely because I will it, just as it is with my body, the origin of my absolute causality. The world must stand in the same relation to me as my body does" (Fichte 1971, IV 229). This passage makes morality seem an individualistic – even egoistic – pursuit. But what Fichte has in mind (this comes out clearly in his discussion of duties in the last part of the *Sittenlehre*) is actually the independence of rational agency in general – one's own

embodiment, history, current physical and social situation) and background beliefs about natural laws and empirical regularities. The result is a specific imperative – to take the action that, given one's situation and background beliefs, seems best to further the moral end. The beginning point is “the determinate limitation in which the individual finds himself”, the guiding principle is “absolute freedom from all limitation”, and because of the specificity of the situation in which each agent finds himself, there is in each case something determinate that the moral law demands.²¹ This imperative has a universal character in that it (implicitly) claims to be the one any rational agent in exactly this situation with exactly this set of background beliefs ought to construct. The moral law demands that we act as if we were “everyman” – that is as anyone would in our situation – and Fichte claims that this is the real meaning of Kant's formula of universal law.²²

So for Fichte moral decision-making is not in the first instance a matter of applying a universal rule to a set of maxims generated by desires (whatever they happen to be) together with background beliefs and circumstances, but instead a matter of extracting from the conjunction of the moral end, background beliefs and circumstances a concrete imperative with a universal character. One knows one has reached the correct determination of what to do in a given circumstance by the presence of a feeling of certainty, a subjective conviction about one's duty. This is the voice of conscience,²³ which is in each case determinate and specific to our situation (cf. IV 173: conscience is “*the immediate consciousness of our determinate duty*”). The Fichtean version of the categorical imperative, then, is: “*always act according to your best conviction of your duty; or: act according to your conscience*”²⁴.

Ad 2) For Fichte, since moral ends are universal (in the sense just outlined), moral reasons are publicly discussable. In attaining certainty of one's subjective convictions one ought to employ a process of public reasoning,²⁵ and there is a corresponding duty to be open to ethical persuasion by others, to be willing to engage in rational discussion of

and that of every member of the moral community – from any external limitations. He sees this guiding end as unattainable but approachable, like a mathematical limit. (Interestingly, it is unattainable not for the obvious reasons, but because in attaining it one would cease to be a moral agent, because (for lack of an opposing not-I) one would cease to be a self-conscious individual, since one is an individual, according to Fichte, in virtue of being embodied and delimited from a world that stands opposed to one in a *particular* way. For discussions of Fichte's conception of individuality during this period see Zöller 1998 and Düsing 1991.)

²¹ Fichte 1971, IV 166.

²² Fichte 1971, IV 233.

²³ Fichte 1971, IV 166 f.

²⁴ Fichte 1971, IV 156 – emphasis in original.

²⁵ Fichte 1971, IV 246 f.

the appropriateness of one's intentions.²⁶ The moral task is in part a collective one. All free beings ought to have the same final end; each ought to seek maximal material self-determination consistent with the maximal material self-determination of all. If this sort of unanimity were impossible, the final ends of a plurality of free beings would necessarily conflict, and so would be impossible for each to rationally strive for, given the existence of more than one. Consensus on what achieving this end requires (in these collective circumstances and given each individual's capacities) is reached through a process of ethical dialogue.²⁷

But despite the expectation of consensus and the obligation to reach it, from a formal perspective the authority of individual conscience is absolute. So for instance it is always wrong to try to cause someone to follow the deliverance of your conscience rather than his.²⁸ Individual conscience, not any sort of authority, is the source of moral certainty and the ultimate arbiter even of what ought also to be the result of inter-subjective agreement.

In both the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (nn. 632-671) and the *Philosophy of Right* (§§129-140) Hegel took issue with this Fichtean idea as it had played itself out in the ethical subjectivism of the likes of Schlegel. He objected that in elevating the deliverances of individual conscience over the universal ethical life of the community, the ethics of subjective conviction leads to hypocrisy and evil.²⁹ If "a good heart, good intentions and subjective conviction" are "the only factors that give actions their value," then "a person is able to transform whatever he does into something good by the reflection of good intentions and motives, and the element of his *conviction* renders it good"³⁰. "Whether the assurance of acting from a conviction of duty is *true*, whether what is done is actually a *duty* – these questions or doubts have no meaning when addressed to conscience."³¹

²⁶ Fichte 1971, IV 245.

²⁷ Fichte 1971, IV 230-233.

²⁸ Fichte 1971, IV, 233.

²⁹ See especially Hegel 1977, 401 (n. 660) and Hegel 1991, 170 ff. (§ 140).

³⁰ Hegel 1991, 178 (§ 140).

³¹ Hegel 1977, 396 (n. 654). Hegel goes on, in n. 655 (Hegel 1977, 397): "Conscience, then, in the majesty of its elevation above specific law and every content of duty, puts whatever content it pleases into its knowing and willing. It is the moral genius which knows the inner voice of what it immediately knows to be a divine voice; and since, in knowing this, it has an equally immediate knowledge of existence, it is the divine creative power which in its Notion possesses the spontaneity of life. Equally, it is in its own self divine worship, for its action is the contemplation of its own divinity." In the *Phenomenology* discussion, Hegel traces the idea criticized to Fichte (he talks about consciousness's "withdrawal into contemplation of the 'I=I'" in n. 657 (Hegel

So Fichte's account of moral judgment (conscience as exercising reflecting rather than determining judgment and so beginning from concrete circumstances rather than general principles; individual conscience as having ultimate normative authority) sets Fichte clearly apart from both Hegel and Kant. When we turn to the second volume of *Either/Or*, we find there the very same (in the context) uniquely Fichtean set of commitments about moral judgment.

On the Judge's account, living ethically is not a matter of the application of a general principle to desires as givens, but instead a matter of taking stock of one's concrete situation and coming to a judgment about what that situation demands. He does not tell us in very clear terms what the moral end is (describing it as becoming one's true or absolute self), but the sort of practical deliberation the Judge describes is Fichte's end-oriented reflective rather than Kant's maxim-sifting determining judgment. Ethical judgment is a matter of "transforming the particular into the universal"³² – not applying the universal to the particular as a test. One's concrete situation is one's ethical task, "the material with which [the ethical] is to build and that which it is to build"³³. Duties cannot even be stated in abstraction from individual situation.³⁴ What distinguishes correct practical deliberation is the universality not of its starting point but of its result, since the ethical task is to transform oneself into the "universal individual"³⁵. "The person who lives ethically expresses the universal in his life. He makes himself the universal human being, not by taking off his concretion [...] but by putting it on and interpenetrating it with the universal."³⁶ The voice of conscience is the subjective certainty of the universality (in what looks like the Fichtean sense) of one's projected end. "This is the

1977, 398)). In the *Philosophy of Right* discussion, on the other hand, Fries figures more prominently (as Wood 1990, chapter 10, argues) and Hegel explicitly exempts Fichte from the criticism he aims at Schlegel (at Hegel 1977, 184).

³² Kierkegaard 1987, 328 f. (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 294-95).

³³ Kierkegaard 1987, 253 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 227).

³⁴ See e.g. Kierkegaard 1987, 263 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 236): "I never say of a man: He is doing duty or duties; but I say: He is doing *his* duty; I say: I am doing *my* duty, do *your* duty."

³⁵ Kierkegaard 1987, 261 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 234).

³⁶ Kierkegaard 1987, 256 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 229).

secret that lies in the conscience; this is the secret the individual life has within itself – that simultaneously it is an individual life and also the universal.”³⁷

One’s situation includes one’s social situation, and this will matter in the determination of one’s duty. “The self that is the objective is not an abstract self that fits everywhere and therefore nowhere but is a concrete self in living interaction with these specific surroundings, these life conditions, this order of things.”³⁸ It is “not only a personal self, but a social, civic self”³⁹. But one does not look to society or any external authority for certainty of one’s duty, according to the Judge. I am the only one with the requisite certainty about my duty: it may well become impossible for someone else to say what my duty is, even though it will always be possible for him to say what his duty is.⁴⁰ Despite the fact that one can publicly debate, and expect inter-subjective agreement on, ethical questions (as the Judge’s entire undertaking assumes), the final arbiter of duty is subjective certainty, the voice of conscience.

So although the Judge’s discussion is comparatively sketchy, it is clear enough that it is quite close to Fichte’s and quite far from both Hegel’s and Kant’s on the nature and authority of moral conscience. (Interestingly, the Judge’s account makes even clearer than Fichte’s the epistemic limitation that forms the link between these two claims: the second follows from the first given the factual premise that human beings have a limited capacity to put themselves in one another’s shoes. If moral judgment requires an awareness of one’s total situation in all its detail, it follows that another cannot make one’s moral judgments for one unless that other can know everything about one’s situation and forget, for purposes of deliberation, everything about his or her own.)

The two remaining areas of agreement to which I would like (very briefly) to point concern the account of marriage and the account of

³⁷ Kierkegaard 1987, 255 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 229). See also Kierkegaard 1987, 256 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 230): “Thus he who lives ethically has himself as his task. His self in its immediacy is defined by accidental characteristics; the task is to work the accidental and the universal together into a whole.” See also Kierkegaard 1987, 261 f. (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 234-35), where the Judge emphasizes that the universal emerges *through* concreteness.

³⁸ Kierkegaard 1987, 262 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 235).

³⁹ Kierkegaard 1987, 262 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 235).

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard 1987, 264 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 237).

immorality. Fichte's discussion of marriage in particular, its status as a duty and its relation to love, reads like a veritable outline for parts of the Judge's more extensive one. Fichte: Marriage is everyone's absolute vocation; there are aspects of human character that can be developed only in marriage; true friendship follows upon marriage and is only possible there; the original human tendency is toward egoism, but in marriage *nature itself* leads one to forget oneself in another; "The unmarried person is only half a human being"; though we cannot be directly obliged to love in the way that makes marriage appropriate, it *is* our duty not to remain unmarried through our own fault.⁴¹ Judge Wilhelm: Marriage is a duty, though whom one marries depends on love of the sort that cannot be commanded;⁴² marriage is a "school for character" (though one should not marry for that reason alone);⁴³ extra-marital friendship is ethically inferior to the friendship that is part of the marriage relation;⁴⁴ marriage frees the individual from the domination of nature by freeing him from his own habits and whims;⁴⁵ the unmarried individual is not "at home in the world";⁴⁶ love of the sort operative in marriage is a going-out-of-oneself that overcomes the tendency to remain self-enclosed, and is so conducive to leading an ethical life.⁴⁷ The Judge and Fichte share the general idea that marriage is a step on the path to becoming an ethically developed person and that the love relation as nature's way of overcoming itself and pushing us toward becoming (more) ethical beings. (They also share the idea that the love relation is, in its moral significance, fundamentally asymmetrical. The woman loves, and that love is the basis for her relation to her partner; her love gives rise to duties for her partner, which are significant for his ethical development – but not for hers. Interpreters inclined to trace the Judge's views on marriage to Hegel should take note of the fact that for the latter, the ethical significance of love and marriage is

⁴¹ All from Fichte 1971, IV 332 f.

⁴² Kierkegaard 1987, 301-305 et passim (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 270-273 et passim).

⁴³ Kierkegaard 1987, 66 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 60 f.).

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard 1987, 317 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 284).

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard 1987, 67n (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 62n).

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard 1987, 84 ff. (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 77 ff.).

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard 1987, 109 f. (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 100).

founded on the recognition relation they involve and so is, at a fundamental level, symmetrical. His *Philosophy of Right* comparison of women to plants notwithstanding, his views on relations between the sexes are markedly more progressive than the Judge's.)

Judge Wilhelm and Fichte also agree that immorality results from a sort of failure of exertion on the part of the agent. Moral evil is the result of laziness, according to Fichte – which in turn is the result of a sort of inertia whose source is one's animal nature.⁴⁸ How is it that laziness leads to immorality? Not, apparently, by directly inclining us to avoid doing our duty in those cases where we have clearly grasped what it is, for immediately preceding the discussion of laziness Fichte explains that we cannot be fully conscious of our duty and fail to will to do it. In order not to will our duty, we need to have an obscured conception of it. What laziness gets us, then, is an obscured conception of our duty. Correct cognition of our duty is a matter of the energy with which we apply ourselves to the activity of reflective judgment. Only if we fail to ponder hard enough to see our duty do we fail to will it. According to Fichte, laziness is “the radical evil in human nature” (though clearly what he has described is not radical evil in the Kantian sense familiar to readers of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*; moral evil in that sense does not exist, for Fichte).⁴⁹

The Judge has a remarkably similar view. He claims that willing the right thing is a matter of willing with utmost energy – not because willing with utmost energy directly guarantees the right choice, but because it guarantees one's apprehension of the correct thing to do, which in turn guarantees the right choice. “[W]hat is important in choosing is not so much to choose the right thing as the energy, the earnestness, and the pathos with which one chooses.” Why? Because “even though a person chose the wrong thing, he nevertheless, by virtue of the energy with which he chose, will discover that he chose the wrong thing”⁵⁰. The point is not to be able to “count on [my] fingers how many duties [I have]” but rather “the energy with which I

⁴⁸ Fichte 1971, IV 199.

⁴⁹ Fichte 1971, IV 202.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard 1987, 167 f. (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 152).

become ethically conscious"⁵¹. This is why the Judge (more consistent than Fichte on this count) *denies* the existence of radical evil in the Kantian sense.⁵²

These, then, are the reasons to think that Kierkegaard used Fichte – rather than Kant, or Hegel, or some self-constructed compilation of the two – as his main model for the ethical standpoint as explained by Judge Wilhelm. Of course, the most significant aspect of the ethical standpoint as Kierkegaard construes it in *Either/Or* is the idea that the source of moral imperatives lies in agency. This thought is the defining thought of the ethics of autonomy, and so fundamental for Kant and (though in quite different form) for Hegel as well as for Fichte. The formulation of the idea in Fichte (the source of normativity in “selfhood”) is closer to the Judge’s characterization than formulations prominent in Kant or Hegel. But the *agreement* is significant, since even if my thesis that Kierkegaard used Fichte to construct the positive characterization of the ethical standpoint in *Either/Or* is correct, his criticism of that standpoint is aimed not solely at Fichte, but rather at this defining idea of the ethics of autonomy. Before saying something about that criticism, though, let me say a bit more about how, exactly, selfhood gives rise to imperatives in Fichte’s *Sittenlehre* and in *Either/Or*.

§ II. *Autonomy in Fichte and in Either/Or*

According to Fichte, to be a self or an I is to be an agent whose activity itself generates the norms by which that activity is to be evaluated.⁵³ One

⁵¹ Kierkegaard 1987, 266 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 239); Kierkegaard 1987, 270 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 242).

⁵² Kierkegaard 1987, 174, 175 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 157, 159).

⁵³ Fichte’s notion of the I (as a practical principle) is a descendant of Kant’s notion of the rational will: to be a rational will is to be something that comes equipped with a set of norms binding upon one’s willing, norms that have their source in rational willing itself. Contemporary interpreters of Kant disagree on the question of *how* exactly these norms flow from this source, and are divided between constructivist (e.g. O’Neill, Korsgaard) and broadly realist (e.g. Wood) readings. Fichte’s view **is seems** to me to be quite clearly better aligned with the constructivist interpretation, but for a case that Fichte’s is a realist view, see Wood forthcoming and 2000).

finds in the text a number of distinct explanations of how that works; I will reproduce Neuhouser's helpful distinction between an "individualist" and a "universalist" construal of the account.⁵⁴ On the individualist construal, finding out what one is supposed to do is a matter of finding and acting on the norms that are most truly expressive of oneself as an individual agent. Now since, for Fichte, "the subject is originally – that is, apart from its own doing – nothing at all: it must first make itself into what it will become through its own activity,"⁵⁵ on this construal these norms are one's own individual creation in a quite strong sense. On the universalist interpretation, which has more support in the text (and which I in fact presupposed in the above discussion), finding out what one is supposed to do is a matter of finding out the universal end of subjectivity *per se*, which will then be one's moral end as an individual. Fichte talks about our awareness of being part of a community of agents which itself is grounded in a supra-personal absolute subject whose end is self-sufficiency. The moral demand upon the individual is then to do its best to further the self-sufficiency of that absolute of which it is a finite expression.

Now it is clear that the Judge agrees with the essence of the view that to be a self is essentially to be an agent and that agency is itself (somehow) the source of ethical norms. "The task the ethical individual sets for himself is to transform himself into the universal individual [...]. But to transform himself into the universal human being is possible only if I already have it within myself *kata dynamin*."⁵⁶ The individual becomes an ethical individual by becoming "transparent to himself"⁵⁷ and the good that is chosen is the true self that comes into view in this transparency. Fichte's account of active, self-positing subjectivity is certainly called to mind when, in the critical discussion at II 189 ff. of choice of the ethical as choice of oneself in one's "eternal validity", the Judge writes: "When I choose absolutely, I choose [...] the absolute, for I myself am the absolute; I posit

⁵⁴ In Neuhouser 1990, chapter 4.

⁵⁵ Fichte 1971, IV 50.

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard 1987, 261 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 234).

⁵⁷ Kierkegaard 1987, 258 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 231).

the absolute, and I myself am the absolute"⁵⁸. The self-positing, absolute self is the source of the norms by which the self as empirical agent is bound – these are Fichte's formulations rather than Kant's or Hegel's.

That said, it is hard to overlook the fact that the Judge gives no clear account of how that works and what the resulting norms are. In fact where the Judge addresses most directly the question of how subjectivity gives rise to ethical demands, we encounter some of the most obscure passages of the second letter. Here is one (part of which I have already cited):

When I choose absolutely, I choose despair, and in despair I choose the absolute, for I myself am the absolute; I posit the absolute, and I myself am the absolute. But in other words with exactly the same meaning I may say: I choose the absolute that chooses me; I posit the absolute that posits me – for if I do not keep in mind that this second expression is just as absolute, then my category of choosing is untrue, because it is precisely the identity of both. What I choose, I do not posit, for if it were not posited [already] I could not choose it, and yet if I did not posit it by choosing it I would not choose it. It is, for if it were not I could not choose it; it is not, for it first comes into existence through my choosing it, and otherwise my choice would be an illusion.⁵⁹

The difficulty is with answering the question of whether my 'true' self (the self I ought, ethically speaking, to become) is something that I myself create, or something that exists independently of my acts of will. This is the point in the text where the Judge argues that choosing oneself in the properly ethical way requires repenting of one's past, "for only when I choose myself as guilty do I absolutely choose myself, if I am at all to choose myself absolutely in such a way that it is not identical with creating myself"⁶⁰. He seems to want to steer a course between a view whereon norms are self-generated but worryingly subjective ("creating myself"), and one whereon they are objective but not in any obvious way self-generated (their satisfaction not in any obvious way definable as "choosing myself"). A good explanation for this would be the unpalatability of both

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard 1987, 213 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 191).

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard 1987, 213 f. (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 191 f.).

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard 1987, 216 f. (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, II 194).

the individualist and universalist construals of ethics on the Fichtean model and the difficulty of fusing them. A closer look at those construals shows them to be worrisome in just these ways.

The major problem of the individualist construal is one Hegel pointed out in the discussions of the ethics of conscience I mentioned in § I. On the individualist construal, the norms that bind the individual have no objective standing, and so do not actually constrain. They are personal standards that the agent sets for herself, standards that could in principle change from day to day. Hegel argues that such a view of the source of norms “implies that objective goodness is something constructed by my conviction, sustained by me alone, and that I, as lord and master, can make it come and go [as I please]. As soon as I relate myself to something objective, it ceases to exist for me, and so I am poised above an immense void, conjuring up shapes and destroying them”⁶¹. The result, according to Hegel, is that “evil is perverted into good and good into evil”⁶² – which I take to mean that the distinction between good and evil disappears with the disappearance of a normative standard distinct from the will of the agent it is to govern. The romantics seem to have found this consequence of the Fichtean view (on the individualist construal) attractive, but in his dissertation *On the Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard had already embraced the Hegelian criticism of this sort of normative subjectivism.⁶³ Since the Judge’s major target is the life view of the ironic/romantic aesthete *A*, it would be odd (to say the very least) if the Judge *himself* were to embrace this construal.

But there are equally good reasons for thinking the universalist construal cannot be made to work either. The most pressing problem shows itself when we ask how the Fichtean moral end (universalistically construed – again, the self-sufficiency of subjectivity *per se*) can be seen by the individual agent as a *self*-generated one. This is an important question, because central to the ethics of autonomy is the idea that the self-generatedness of norms is the source of their bindingness. That means that the universalist construal works only on the condition that the individual identify her will with the will of the absolute subject or the ‘will’ of reason *per se*, in other words that she see her agency as a part or expression of that absolute subject’s agency. This view is presented in a plainly religious guise in the *Vocation of Man* of 1800 (which Kierkegaard

⁶¹ Hegel 1991, 184.

⁶² Hegel 1991, 170.

⁶³ See the chapter on “Irony after Fichte”, Kierkegaard 1989, 272-286 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, XIII 344-57).

read and was impressed by at a critical early juncture in his philosophical development⁶⁴) as well as in the 1812 version of the *Sittenlehre*. But even in the 1798 *Sittenlehre* we are often told to view the ethical individual as a mere tool of the supra-individual absolute I of which it is a finite determination. Fichte remarks (in the context of explaining that the end of morality is the independence and spontaneity of reason *per se*, not the independence of reason insofar as it is individual) that individuality is a mere means to the end of the radical autonomy of reason.⁶⁵ The universalist interpretation requires the agent to view her actions as expressions of a supra-individual principle (or to view them as free or as imputable to her only insofar as they are expressions of such a principle), and seems to mean ceasing to view herself as an independent locus of moral responsibility, since the causal efficacy is transferred to the principle.⁶⁶ The result is an answer to the question about the source of norms that does away with the individual agents to which the norms were supposed to apply.

This is the direction Kierkegaard thought Hegel took. His most colorful criticisms of the universalist interpretation (that on it we are enjoined to “jump into a passenger car [...] and leave things to the world-historical”⁶⁷) are directed at Hegel, because Hegel was the most prominent exponent of this view. But several references to the “pure I=I” in these discussions (especially in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) point to the view’s origin in Fichte. As I have said, these are not presented as criticisms of an ethical view – they are presented as criticisms of *the absence of* an ethical view. Hegel has no ethics, according to Kierkegaard, because his metaphysics leaves him no agents to which an ethics could be addressed. On this universalist interpretation Fichte’s view has a problem that is structurally identical, even if the philosophical motivations for it are better described as meta-ethical than as metaphysical. But if the universalist interpretation is not an ethical view in the broader of the two senses I distinguished at the beginning, then it cannot be an account of how normativity is related to subjectivity that the Judge could endorse.

⁶⁴ See e.g. Kierkegaard 1909-1978, I A 68.

⁶⁵ Fichte 1971, IV 231.

⁶⁶ See the critique of Fichte/Hegel in Scheler 1973, 370 ff.

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard 1992, 67 f. (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, VII 51).

It seems to me that this dilemma, coupled with the fact that instead of proposing a clear third alternative the Judge throws up a muddled attempt to have it both ways, has some significance. There must be an articulable distinction between choosing oneself and creating oneself if the Judge's position is to be distinct from *A*'s. But nailing that distinction down – without either assimilating agency to rationality or abandoning the idea that the agent is the source of norms – is just the difficulty, for the Judge as for Fichte. That the Judge reaches an impasse at just this point is critical, since it is on this point that the later pseudonyms' criticisms of the ethics of autonomy will press.

§ III. *Autonomy in the Moral-Psychological Works*

The main argument for the inadequacy of the ethical standpoint as Kierkegaard construes it is to be found in the two moral-psychological works, *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death* (and especially chapters two and three of part two of *The Sickness unto Death*⁶⁸). The most prominent target in these discussions is the Socratic doctrine that virtue is knowledge, and the criticism raised is an old one: that on such a view one cannot be responsible for vice (since vicious actions are done in ignorance and so are not imputable). But a fairly explicit parallel is drawn in these sections between Socratic ethics and (broadly) Kantian ethics.⁶⁹ I have argued elsewhere that Kierkegaard's contention in these works is that modern (especially Kantian and post-Kantian) ethical theory is at one with Socratic ethics in denying the possibility of imputable moral wrong and that

⁶⁸ Kierkegaard 1980, 87-100 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, XI 199-211).

⁶⁹ Note the reference to the Greeks' "intellectual categorical imperative" at Kierkegaard 1980, 90 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, XI 201) and the claim at Kierkegaard 1980, 93 f. (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, XI 204 f.) that the secret of modern philosophy is the same principle embraced by "the Greek mind", namely that there is "no difficulty at all connected with the transition from understanding to doing" – indeed that no such transition exists. Kierkegaard's ascription of the Socratic view to all of "ancient ethics" or "the Greek mind" is one of the (many) cases in which he is guilty of fairly gross over-generalization. (Thanks to Terry Irwin and Gail Fine for pressing me to clarify this point.)

this is because, as an ethics of autonomy, it is built on the principle that morality is a constitutive end of action – the same moral-psychological principle that Socrates endorsed and that motivated the claim that virtue is knowledge.⁷⁰

We have seen that this criticism has at least a textual handle in Fichte (who thought that we could fail to will our duty only as a result of failing to see it as our duty), and that the Judge's second letter actually sets up this point that the later pseudonyms will make by denying the existence of radical evil and the possibility of knowing the right and willing the wrong. In fact it is far from clear how ethics on the Fichtean model can avoid this problem. The problem is obvious in the case of the individualist construal. The discussion in *The Sickness unto Death* of the "despair of wanting to be oneself" echoes the complaints Hegel made against Fichte's romantic followers:

The self is its own master, absolutely its own master, so-called; and precisely this is its despair [...] [I]t is easy to see that this absolute ruler is a king without a country, actually ruling over nothing; his position, his sovereignty, is subordinate to the dialectic that rebellion is legitimate at any moment.⁷¹

In despair the self wants to enjoy the total satisfaction of making itself into itself, of developing itself, of being itself [...]. And yet, in the final analysis, what it understands by itself is a riddle; in the very moment when it seems the self is closest to having the building completed, it can arbitrarily dissolve the whole thing into nothing.⁷²

The complaint in these passages about subjectivism and arbitrariness is of course distinct from the complaint about the impossibility of willing the morally wrong. But, as Kierkegaard saw, the first entails the second; the subjectivism of the individualist construal is what makes it unable to

⁷⁰ In Kosch 2006b I explain how this criticism applies to Kant. I also (in chapter five) canvass alternate interpretations of Kierkegaard's criticism of the ethical standpoint and show how they fall short.

⁷¹ Kierkegaard 1980, 69 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, XI 180).

⁷² Kierkegaard 1980, 69 f. (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, XI 181).

account for imputable immorality. He saw a related problem in the universalist construal. On that construal one is to view one's actions as free, as actions in a genuine sense, only insofar as they are expressions of the causality of some underlying principle of subjectivity – the same principle conformity with which defines morality.

In fact the problem Kierkegaard saw with both construals looks to be an ineliminable feature of the fundamental idea of autonomy as a foundation for ethics, the idea that the moral law is normative for the will in virtue of being the will's own law. The connection between the will or agency and the law that governs it is the source both of the interest in the idea – its explanation of why we are bound by moral requirements – and of its difficulty in leaving room for imputable immorality. Saying what it means for the moral law to be the will's own while avoiding commitment to the claim that morality is a constitutive aim of intentional action (i.e., the claim that rules out the possibility of intentional immorality) is in fact something no proponent of such a view seems yet to have managed.⁷³ (I will return to a brief discussion of these problems in the contemporary literature in the concluding section of this paper.)

It might seem a strange complaint about an account of the source of moral imperatives that it might undercut the possibility of an account of imputable wrongdoing. Philosophical ethics usually takes as one of its tasks showing how ethical demands can be compelling, and from this perspective that they might literally compel looks like a good result, not a bad one. It is after all only because so many moral philosophers have embraced this result that Kierkegaard's target can seem to be the whole of philosophical ethics (though the result is strictly unavoidable only for autonomy-based views). Why does Kierkegaard think this a reason for condemning the ethical standpoint so construed? The pseudonymous works give us two answers to this question.

The first is just that to deny that moral evil is a possibility is to be false to the phenomenology of agency and the self-evident facts of moral life. Kierkegaard devoted a

⁷³ I argue that Kant does not manage this in chapter two of Kosch 2006b.

large part of his effort as an author to an extensive typology of moral character, and he did not overlook the various ways, not only of self-consciously abstaining from pursuing the good, but also of self-consciously pursuing the bad for its own sake.⁷⁴ To give just one example, a passage in *The Sickness unto Death*, for instance, describes a form of despair that consists in clinging to one's moral imperfections, insisting upon them, refusing all moral assistance and building one's existence upon such imperfections and the suffering they cause to oneself and others. "Rebelling against all existence, [such despair] feels that it has obtained evidence against it, against its goodness. The person in despair believes that he himself is the evidence, and that is what he wants to be, and therefore he wants to be himself, himself in his torment, in order to protest against all existence with this torment."⁷⁵ This sort of rebellion against the moral order is a description of a possible moral stance – one that in less extreme and sustained forms is not uncommon.

Kierkegaard seems to have thought that the denial that individuals can be moved by anything but the perceived good was motivated by a misplaced or exaggerated desire to make ethical demands seem more compelling.⁷⁶ But he thought that this was a serious disservice to ethics – and this is his second answer to the question. Again just one example: a passage in *Postscript* describes a pastor telling his congregation about the paths of vice and virtue, the one wide and easy, the other narrow and difficult – but his enthusiasm for the path of virtue leads him to describe it as ever wider and easier, and the two paths come to resemble one another to the point where "the sensualist [...] is not only lunatic because he chooses the path of pleasure over the path of virtue, but he is a lunatic sensualist for not choosing the pleasurable path of virtue"⁷⁷. The problem with the pastor's procedure is to have made to path of virtue look so obviously appealing that even the most debauched listener is convinced he must already be on it. Who could be so dull as not to be? Holding such a view is ethically disabling, Kierkegaard thought,

⁷⁴ For non-Kierkegaardian endorsements of this idea, see e.g. Velleman 1992 and Stocker 1979. Neither draws the pessimistic conclusion about the ethics of autonomy that Kierkegaard does. Velleman himself endorses a form of autonomism (see Velleman 1996) and may face a similar difficulty (see Clark 2001).

⁷⁵ Kierkegaard 1980, 73 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, XI 184). He goes on to compare such an individual to an error in an author's writing that becomes conscious of itself as an error, which "wants to mutiny against the author, out of hatred toward him, forbidding him to correct it and in maniacal defiance saying to him: No, I refuse to be erased; I will stand as a witness against you, that you are a second-rate author" (Kierkegaard 1980, 74 = Kierkegaard 1901-1906, XI 185).

⁷⁶ For a concise discussion of why constitutive-end views fail in the case of action while succeeding in the case of belief see Railton 1997.

⁷⁷ Kierkegaard 1992, 403 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, VII 349-50).

because seeing immoral action as literally unintelligible means denying it any relevance in moral self-assessment and in practical deliberation, and thereby overlooking important ethical tasks of self-criticism and self-improvement.

To return to the methodological point about Kierkegaard's strategy in the pseudonymous works that I made at the beginning, for Kierkegaard the problem of "the ethical standpoint" ought to be that of how one understands oneself and exists ethically, how an ethical existence is internally constituted. So how does one understand oneself from within the ethics of autonomy? If the answer is the alternative of the two construals discussed in the last section, there are clear problems for the ethical standpoint. For on either alternative the account of the source of normativity undermines the fundamental commitment of the moral point of view: that one is individually responsible for one's moral *and* immoral choices. The commitments of ethics in this narrower of Kierkegaard's two senses undermine the commitments of ethics in the broader sense. This is a conflict internal to the ethics of autonomy: it requires an account of moral responsibility in order to qualify as an ethical view, but its account of the relation between moral standards and agency makes that requirement impossible to fulfill.

§ IV. The Case of Fear and Trembling

Up until now I have said nothing about Kierkegaard's most widely read work, *Fear and Trembling*. Yet I have said that the ethical standpoint approached from the positive angle in *Either/Or* is the same view criticized in later pseudonymous works, and *Fear and Trembling* is often seen as one of the key later works that explicate the limits of the ethical standpoint as Kierkegaard sees them. Further, in *Fear and Trembling*, Hegel is clearly the most prominent target, Kant seems to be a close second, and Fichte is nowhere to be found. This might seem to pose a problem both for my claim that Fichte rather than Hegel or Kant is the most obvious historical model for the ethical view that Kierkegaard criticizes and for my characterization of that criticism.

This does not seem to me to be a problem, precisely because it seems to me wrong to read *Fear and Trembling* as aimed at articulating the shortcomings of the ethical standpoint. We should read it as aimed primarily at articulating the constraints imposed by a life of faith (as most commentators, but relatively fewer members of the broader philosophical community, already do). Now, a description of faith and the life of faith will include an account of the place in that life of the ethical demands of citizenship and family as well as whatever demands arise out of practical rationality in general. But that the claims of citizenship, family and perhaps practical rationality itself have a scope that is limited by the claims of religious faith if these turn out to be in conflict is not argued for in *Fear and Trembling*. It is presupposed. Likewise, that the ethical standpoint is subordinate to the religious standpoint figures among the book's presuppositions, not the points it aims to establish. So if Hegel and Kant are the most prominent targets, we should expect the focus of the critique to be on their accounts of the life of faith. Likewise, if we find Fichte to be absent, that will be because Kierkegaard did not find him to have had anything plainly indefensible to say about faith.⁷⁸ So in fact my thesis that Fichte is the primary model for the ethical standpoint is another reason to avoid a reading of *Fear and Trembling* that we already have ample reason to avoid.

Those who are already convinced that reading is to be avoided are invited to skip the remainder of this section. For those who are not, I will offer a brief argument for the claim that it is the accounts of religion rather than ethics one finds in Kant and Hegel that are supposed to be undermined by the considerations raised by *Fear and Trembling*. This will take the form of a *reductio* on the supposition that the book is meant as a criticism of the ethical standpoint aimed at the inhabitant of that standpoint, followed by a very brief sketch of the aspects of the views on faith of Kant and Hegel that Kierkegaard found problematic. I realize that what I say here might not quite suffice to convince those committed to reading *Fear and Trembling* as an argument for the limits of some sort of

⁷⁸ In fact, Kierkegaard seems to have thought he had rather interesting things to say about faith – for instance in *The Vocation of Man*, which Kierkegaard read at a critical juncture and refers to in the Gilleleje journal entries of 29 July 1835 (Kierkegaard 1909-1978 I A 68 pp. 43-44 = Kierkegaard 1997–, 17 AA: 6 p. 16) and 1 August 1835 (Kierkegaard 1909-1978 I A 76 = Kierkegaard 1997–, 17 AA: 12 p. 25).

ethical standpoint, since I can discuss only a subset of the many possible variations on such a reading. But I do hope to convince at least those who believe both that *Fear and Trembling* presents such an argument and that it is aimed at Kant or Hegel *in particular*.⁷⁹

How would such an argument proceed? The text presents us with a dilemma which might serve as a first premise: either we give up on Abraham as a paradigm of righteousness⁸⁰ or we admit that the ethical standpoint (or a particular ethical view – the ethics of custom and social duty, or the ethics of universal moral principles) can or must be abandoned in favor of some higher, religious standpoint.⁸¹ But in order to get from this dilemma to the conclusion that there really is some limitation to the ethical standpoint, we need a further premise stating that Abraham *is* a paradigm of righteousness. That looks hard to establish.⁸² The text presents us with two possibilities for establishing the second premise: an appeal to the authority of scriptural revelation, or an appeal to some generalizable features of

⁷⁹ What follows overlaps substantially with the discussion in Kosch 2006b.

⁸⁰ The story that concerns Kierkegaard/*de silentio* in *Fear and Trembling* is of God's command that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac (in Genesis 22). The command is a test, revoked at the last minute, and Abraham is praised for his obedience. Kierkegaard's treatment emphasizes the fact (suggested by Abraham's prescient reply to the unknowing Isaac's query about where the sacrificial animal would come from: "God himself will provide the lamb") that, despite his willingly carrying out every action required for the sacrifice (binding Isaac, putting him on the pile of wood, stretching out his hand with the knife), Abraham never in fact believes he will lose Isaac. He combines a willingness to carry out the command with an apparently unshaken faith that God's promise to him – that he would through Isaac become the father of a great nation – will nonetheless be fulfilled.

⁸¹ Johannes *de silentio* – the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling* – puts it like this: Either the story of Abraham contains a teleological suspension of the ethical, or Abraham is an ordinary murderer (Kierkegaard 1983, 66 = Kierkegaard 1901-1906, III 115-16); "either [...] the single individual as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute, or Abraham is lost" (Kierkegaard 1983, 120 = Kierkegaard 1901-1906 III 165).

⁸² In fact, given that the possibility of any *ethical* justification of Abraham is ruled out, it looks trivially impossible to establish to the satisfaction of any inhabitant of the ethical standpoint. But if it cannot be somehow established, the argument can have no addressee.

Abraham's case that we have non-scriptural grounds for finding compelling. On the first, it is the justification of the biblical Abraham we refuse to give up. On the second, we think Abraham serves to define a class any member of which we would find justified, but not *ethically* justified, even in the absence of a direct scriptural endorsement. People who read the book as an argument for the limitations of secular ethics usually read the argument in one of these two ways. But there is no way to make either argumentative strategy work that is consistent both with the text and with the presumption that Kant and/or Hegel is the target.

The first strategy cannot get off the ground, because both Kant and Hegel explicitly deny scripture the relevant authority – and both use Abraham as a specific example of why they deny it.⁸³

In *The Conflict of the Faculties* Kant argues that apparent direct manifestations of the will of God can never be action guiding, because they either tell us to do something that the moral law allows (in which case they are redundant, because we are allowed to do whatever is in conformity with the moral law on our own authority anyway), or they tell us to do something that the moral law forbids (in which case we are obliged to ignore them, because our certainty of the dictates of morality is total, whereas our certainty that something is a divine command can never be).

For if God should really speak to a human being, the latter could still never know that it was God speaking. It is quite impossible for a human being to apprehend the infinite by his senses, distinguish it from sensible beings, and be acquainted with it as such. – But in some cases the human being can be sure that the voice he hears is not God's; for if the voice commands him to do something contrary to the moral law, then no

⁸³ In fact, the first strategy is question-begging. On it, the force of the argument relies on acceptance of a premise which all on its own entails (and is in fact much stronger than) the argument's conclusion. Anyone who accepts the authority of scripture and its description of Abraham's situation has already accepted a religious standpoint. This is because an essential aspect of the story – and an essential presupposition of this strategy of argument – is that Abraham was in fact a knight of faith and was in fact justified in the eyes of God. But no such thing can be evident from the biblical account viewed as a piece of (mere) history.

matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion.⁸⁴

In the footnote, Kant cites the ‘myth’ of Abraham as something we have to reject once we have grasped this point.

We can use, as an example, the myth of the sacrifice that Abraham was going to make by butchering and burning his only son at God’s command [...] Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: “That I ought not to kill my son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God – of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.”⁸⁵

Abraham should have taken the content of the command (“sacrifice Isaac”) to constitute positive proof that the source of the command was not God. The same point is made in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* in the context of a discussion of miracles.⁸⁶ Kierkegaard shows us, in taking care to have Johannes *de silentio* insist that Abraham is certain of the ethical impermissibility of what he is about to do⁸⁷ and that he has no means of verifying that the source of the command is God⁸⁸ that he is well aware

⁸⁴ Kant 1996b, 283 (Kant 1968, 7: 63).

⁸⁵ Kant 1996b, 283n (Kant 1968, 7: 63n).

⁸⁶ “For, as regards theistic miracles, reason can at least have a negative criterion at its disposal, namely, if something is represented as commanded by God in a direct manifestation of him yet is directly in conflict with morality, it cannot be a divine miracle despite every appearance of being one (e.g. if a father were ordered to kill his son who, so far as he knows, is totally innocent) [...]” (Kant 1996b, 124 = Kant 1968, 6:87).

⁸⁷ *De silentio* describes Abraham as, in ethical terms, “a murderer” at Kierkegaard 1983, 30, 55, 57, 66 and 74 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, III 82, 105, 107, 116 and 123). “In ethical terms, Abraham’s relation to Isaac is quite simply this: the father shall love the son more than himself.” (Kierkegaard 1983, 57 = Kierkegaard 1901-1906, III 107) – but, “In the moment he is about to sacrifice Isaac, the ethical expression for what he is doing is: he hates Isaac” (Kierkegaard 1983, 74 = Kierkegaard 1901-1906, III 122).

⁸⁸ Cf. Kierkegaard 1983, 78 ff. (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, III 126 ff.): “The tragic hero is soon finished [...]. The knight of faith, however, is kept in a state of sleeplessness, for he is constantly being tested, and at every moment there is the possibility of his returning penitently to the universal, and this possibility may be a spiritual trial as well as the truth. He cannot get any information on that from any man [...]” and Kierkegaard 1983, 62 ff. (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, III 112 ff.): “How does the single individual reassure himself that he is legitimate?”

of Kant's position. Since it would be utterly ineffective to hold up Abraham's case as a counterexample to this view which explicitly refuses to accord it that status, the first strategy has to fail if Kant is its target.

What if we take Hegel rather than Kant as the target here? There are good reasons to do so. The "tragic heroes" discussed (Jephthah, Agamemnon and Brutus, all of whom were called upon to sacrifice their children for higher national ends) are meant to provide examples of ethical conduct (in the terms of the text), but although according to Hegel they are ethically exemplary (at least for their times), their conduct is as unethical as Abraham's in Kant's terms. Some other examples of "exceptions" to the ethical proffered are not actually exceptions to Kantian ethical demands.⁸⁹ Finally, Johannes makes some reference to "the Hegelian philosophy" at the beginning of each problema, and cites a specific passage from the *Philosophy of Right* at the beginning of the first.⁹⁰

The passage cited is the very section on conscience (§§ 129-140) discussed above. What does Hegel's criticism of the ethics of conscience have to do with Abraham, and with the question, posed in the first Problema, of whether there is a teleological suspension of the ethical? In his discussion of the relation of religious belief to the state in § 270 of the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues that demands of religion and citizenship are generally consistent, at least if religion is properly understood not as "superstition" but as a different mode of access (one characterized by "feeling, representational thought and faith") to the same absolute truth to which philosophy is the cognitive mode of access, a truth whose consequences for individual action get their objective expression in the laws of the community.⁹¹ But if we take religious dictates construed as subjective deliverances of conscience to trump the laws of the state where these conflict, the result is instability, arbitrariness, and a fanaticism which "repudiates all political institutions and legal order as restrictive limitations on the inner emotions and as incommensurate with the infinity of these"⁹². It is here that Hegel points us back to the discussion in § 140 of the pernicious results of allowing subjective conviction to function as the standard of right action: we are to take the religion of conscience to have

⁸⁹ A good example is the discussion of Sarah from the book of Tobit, who would not be "mocked" by Kantian ethical demands in the same way that she is mocked by Hegelian ethical demands, since for Kant there is no duty to marry (cf. Kierkegaard 1983, 102 f. = Kierkegaard 1901-1906, III 149 f.).

⁹⁰ Kierkegaard 1983, 55 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, III 105).

⁹¹ Hegel 1991, 293.

⁹² "The consequence for human behavior is [such advice as] 'To the righteous no law is given', 'Be pious, and you may otherwise do as you please'". These thoughts are all right so long as they "remain an inward disposition and viewpoint", but once they are put into action the result is fanaticism. Hegel 1991, 293.

the same problems as the ethics of conscience. He goes on to address some possible conflicts of religious conviction and duties of citizenship. Where such conflicts are absolute (as in the case of the duty to serve in the army and religious belief in pacifism – Hegel mentions the Quakers and Anabaptists in a footnote), a state which is strong enough is allowed to adopt a tolerant attitude toward dissenting practices.⁹³ But that is optional, not only in point of political fact but also, and more importantly, in normative terms. The laws of the community have normative priority over subjective religious convictions.

It is clear enough that this commits Hegel to rejecting Abraham as an example of the right sort. But like Kant, Hegel is consistent on this issue. He does not mention Abraham in the *Philosophy of Right*, but in one of the introductions to the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* he makes the following interesting parallel. (The context is a discussion of the claim that God is inscrutable, which Hegel here denies. Either we understand what is said of God in ancient stories as true of a God we understand, or we have to dismiss the stories as false.)

When it is said of what God is supposed to be that he was castrated and then healed by the attachment of the organs of a he-goat, we do not understand how things of this kind could be said of God; nor do we understand any longer how God could have ordered Abraham to slay his son. Either we explain these things as mere downright errors, in which case they are not called unintelligible, or we explain them as intelligible (or retain a demand to find intelligibility in them), and this means that there must be something in them which we can make our own, either one correct meaning or at least one formal meaning consistent with another.⁹⁴

So Hegel denies that the Abraham story can be taken literally, on the grounds that the conception of God at work in it is not something we can recognize as a conception of God – and the problem is precisely that the God in the story demands the sacrifice of Isaac. The story itself must either be dismissed as an error or explained as a primitive expression of something we find intelligible on the basis of our current (philosophical) conception of God – but that intelligible something cannot be the order to sacrifice Isaac,

⁹³ Hegel 1991, 295.

⁹⁴ Hegel 1985, 41. This is from one of the introductions to the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. The lectures themselves were first published by Michelet in his 1833 edition of Hegel's works. Kierkegaard did not own this, and anyway the cited passage (from the Berlin introduction of 1820) was not included in that edition (see note 9 to page 41). But Hegel's students heard it and in any event this approach to Abraham is so intuitively Hegelian that it is difficult to imagine any other.

because that could not have proceeded from anything we could recognize as God. Such stories are examples of “immediate vision, feeling, faith, or whatever we call it,” which is an early way of grasping the divine that is surpassed by a philosophical account of “the thought-out and known being of God”⁹⁵. They do not contain evidence of a private, hidden connection to God that cannot be spelled out in reason’s terms.

In denying that the story of Abraham and Isaac is to be taken literally – because taken literally it entails an impossible view of God – Hegel also denied the biblical Abraham the status he would need to have in order to function as the sort of counterexample to the standpoint of *Sittlichkeit* this variation of the proposed argument requires. So the argument (on this interpretation of it) fares no better when Hegel is taken to be its target than it did when Kant was taken to be its target. Again, *de silentio* seems to be preaching to the converted in establishing the first premise, while appealing to a scriptural authority whose legitimacy has already been repudiated in establishing the second.

What about the second strategy for establishing the second premise? This strategy, on which the aim is to show Abraham’s to be a case of conduct we can have reasons for thinking justified which are neither based on the authority of scripture nor consistent with the requirements for ethical justification, looks more promising on its face, since it might (depending on the reasons adduced) have something to say to someone with Kantian or Hegelian commitments. The argument, on this reading, not only has a potentially broader audience; it also embodies a quite different complaint: that the ethical point of view does not leave room for a sort of case for which, for some reason or other, we think it ought to leave room. Now, instead of supplying the case, we need to supply (in addition to the

⁹⁵ “*Pious* vision we encounter, for example, in the Bible, in both Testaments: in the Old Testament we find it in the universal worship of God in all natural phenomena (as in Job), in thunder and lightning, in the light of day and night, in the hills, the cedars of Lebanon, the birds in the trees, in wild animals, lions, whales, creeping things, etc., and in a universal providence governing human affairs and situations. But this pious soul’s vision of God is totally different from an intelligent look into the nature of spirit; there is no question, in the pious vision, of philosophy, of the thought-out and known being of God, since it is precisely that so-called immediate vision, feeling, faith, or whatever we call it, in which thinking differentiates itself; it advances out of this immediacy, out of being mere simple general vision or feeling” (Hegel 1985, 42).

dilemma) some general reason for wanting to accommodate cases relevantly *similar* to Abraham's.

One can find suggestions for several versions of this strategy in the literature.⁹⁶ One is to cite Abraham's depth of commitment and his strength of character as good-making features invisible from the perspective of a morality of *Sitten*, or a morality of universal laws. The difficulty it faces is one of sufficiently distinguishing Abraham's depth of commitment or strength of character from that of *de silentio*'s contrast cases: Agamemnon, Jephthah and Brutus.⁹⁷ A second variant is to see Abraham's case as an illustration of the need for personalized duties – duties not following from universal practical principles coupled with non-moral facts about the world and our situation.⁹⁸ But the cases about which it is most plausible to say that there is some practical need for personalized duties are those in which we need to adjudicate multiple competing moral demands. Yet Abraham's is a case where a perfect duty (to refrain from murdering his son) encounters no competition *except* from the alleged divine command. The command is the source of the ethical problem, not a solution to any ethical problem Abraham had already. Finally, we are familiar with more general arguments – made by both atheists and theists – to the effect that no sense can be made of ethics on any but theological

⁹⁶ I will cite specific readings below, but two good recent overviews of such efforts to read *Fear and Trembling* as an argument on behalf of a higher standpoint than that of ethics can be found in Lippitt 2003, chapters 4 and 6, and in Green 1998, section III. The characterization I give here is far from exhaustive.

⁹⁷ Alternatively, if the relevant descriptor is trust (see e.g. Cross 2003), there is no disagreement between Johannes and Hegel about Kierkegaard's case – since trust is exactly the feature that makes Abraham paradigmatic (albeit of an outdated form of religious consciousness) according to Hegel. See note 108 below.

⁹⁸ Adams (1987) takes this idea – that the individual is in danger of being “morally fragmented, crushed or immobilized” in cases in which general ethical principles plus non-normative facts about my situation fail “to write my name legibly on any particular task” – as a major concern of Kierkegaard's and a major impetus behind his endorsement of religious as opposed to philosophical ethics. He does not intend it as an interpretation of *Fear and Trembling*, however, and acknowledges that the major instances of overriding religious duties Kierkegaard discusses (Abraham's case, but also the cases of the estranged fiancés) are ones in which “universalist” ethics has indeed written the individual's name perfectly legibly on the task at issue (to care for one's own son, to keep one's own promises of marriage) and it is religious commitment that excuses the individual from what would otherwise quite unambiguously be required of him.

voluntarist terms.⁹⁹ But there is no trace of such an argument in *Fear and Trembling* – unless, that is, we take the appeal to the example of the biblical Abraham as a premise in it.¹⁰⁰

There is a further possibility, not yet mentioned, for reading *Fear and Trembling* as an argument against ethics on a Kantian or Hegelian understanding, one that does not begin from *de silentio*'s dilemma. This is to take the complaint to be that the ethical standpoint as described seems committed to a substantive point of metaphysics – *viz.*, the non-existence of a God who could (or would) step into human experience and overwrite the ethical – and that it lacks the resources to justify such a strong metaphysical presupposition. Kant's doctrine of God as practical postulate and Hegel's doctrine of the divinity of ethical life both look like live options for the target of such a criticism. But although Kierkegaard was certainly familiar with the criticisms of the practical postulate view that were part of any introductory lectures on Kant's practical philosophy (including the ones Kierkegaard heard¹⁰¹), the idea that ethics might be overstepping its bounds in purporting to answer metaphysical questions does not appear in *Fear and Trembling*. Likewise, although Problema II does begin with a reference to Hegel's pantheism and his view of ethical life as the objective expression of *Geist*, and although arguments against Hegelian metaphysics on both metaphysical grounds and ethical grounds are found *elsewhere* in the pseudonymous works, *Fear and Trembling* contains none of these. Instead, Johannes proceeds to point out that "If this train of thought is sound, if there

⁹⁹ The most often cited today are Anscombe (1958) and Mackie (1977). See also Mavrodes 1986. On this strategy of assimilating the ethical to that which is commanded by God suggests the answer to the question posed by the second Problema ("Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?") must be "no" – Abraham's action *is* ethical, on the correct understanding of ethics (see Donnelly 1981; Evans 1981). It therefore conflicts with *de silentio*'s repeated insistence that there are *no* ethical considerations to which Abraham can appeal (that his conduct is absolutely unethical) (see Green 1998, 264 ff.).

¹⁰⁰ Even if we do that, as Green (1998: 267 ff.) argues, other necessary theological premises are lacking.

¹⁰¹ See the notes to Martensen's Lectures on the History of Philosophy from Kant to Hegel, reproduced at Kierkegaard 1909-1978 II C 25.

is nothing incommensurable in a human life [...] then Hegel was right. But he was not right in speaking about faith or permitting Abraham to be regarded as its father”¹⁰².

That comment suggests a completely different reading of the project of the book, one that seems to me to be quite clearly correct. It suggests that the main concern is not with the limits of ethics but with the nature and potential consequences of religious faith. Instead of reading *Fear and Trembling* as a failed argument for the inadequacy of secular ethics, we should read it as successful examination of the meaning and implications of a religious standpoint whose validity is *assumed*. Kant and Hegel are indeed used as contrast cases, but what the view in *Fear and Trembling* is contrasted with is not their view of ethics but instead their account of the nature of religious faith. Hegel’s characterization of faith as a form of “immediacy” that ought to have been replaced in the modern era with more a reflective, philosophical grasp of the divine is a frequent target in other works. And one might well see a problem with Hegel’s use of Abraham as a paradigm example of faith as immediacy in the *Lectures on Philosophy of Religion*, where Hegel praises Abraham for his absolute trust in God.¹⁰³ If the stories that best reveal Abraham’s trust are themselves unintelligible, how can we see Abraham as praiseworthy in this way? Likewise, Kant’s account of religious belief is not without tensions. We are, for example, obliged by practical reason to believe in a God whose powers encompass the

¹⁰² Kierkegaard 1983, 68 (Kierkegaard 1901-1906, III 117 f.).

¹⁰³ Hegel praises Abraham for his obedient and trusting attitude and points this out as one of the unifying characteristics of his people’s history. “This trust is what strikes us as remarkable in the writings of the Jewish people; it is preserved through so many great victories, which are emphasized also in Christianity. It is this trust, this Faith of Abraham’s, that causes the history of this people to carry on; it also constitutes the turning point in the book of Job” (Hegel 1987, 446). Hegel goes on to say that Job’s experience is “universal” (not only of significance to one religion). It represents the moment of absolute trust in an absolutely powerful (if inscrutable) divinity that is one of the contributions of the Jewish religion to the development of consciousness. (Of course the trust-relation, like the view of God as an inscrutable overwhelming force, is superseded in later religious configurations and cannot define a *contemporary* religious consciousness.)

ability to proportion happiness to virtue in an afterlife but do not include the ability to bring about belief (irrational perhaps, but nonetheless justified in religious terms) in a finite understanding.¹⁰⁴ Note, though, that these are fundamentally problems for religious believers; neither is a problem that someone not already committed to a religious life has any reason to worry about.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

I hope to have established at least that keeping Fichte in mind when looking at Kierkegaard's discussion of the ethical standpoint helps clarify the positive characterization in works like *Either/Or*, the account of that standpoint's shortcomings in later works, and the place of *Fear and Trembling* in that portion of Kierkegaard's project in the pseudonyms. What more general conclusion are we to draw from this examination of Fichte's role in Kierkegaard's construction of the ethical standpoint?

One conclusion it supports is a revised estimation of the breadth of Fichte's influence, and thus of his historical significance. A fact widely acknowledged but less widely put to concrete use is that the relative importance of historical figures can look radically different from our perspective than it did from the perspective of their more immediate successors. Fichte was an enormously important figure not only for the development of romanticism and of the idealism of Schelling and Hegel – so much is known – but also for the dissemination of Kantian ethics to a broader audience well into the 19th century (probably until the rise of neo-

¹⁰⁴ Of course the first task requires only logistical capacities; but it is wrong to think that the second requires the impossible. Such a belief need not be rationally justified to be appropriate from a religious perspective – it need only have the right source. But that means it need not be brought about through the usual channels and so its possibility does not require e.g. that the infinite appear as infinite in a finite empirical manifestation or any other conceptual impossibility. See chapter six of Kosch 2006b for a longer discussion of Kierkegaard's views on this topic.

¹⁰⁵ This is true even of the second if one believes (as I do) that Kant's "antinomy of practical reason" is no antinomy at all and that therefore its solution – the postulates of God and immortality – is unmotivated by any concerns of practical reason.

Kantianism).¹⁰⁶ He was certainly more important as an interpreter of Kantian ethics than he is taken to be today, and Kierkegaard probably took Fichte's view as his target because he thought it to be the best-worked-out version of Kantian ethics available to attack.¹⁰⁷

Another conclusion regards the relevance of Kierkegaard's concerns to contemporary debates in ethics and moral psychology. Kantian ethics has seen a major renaissance in contemporary philosophy, along with the idea that autonomy can provide the foundation of ethics. The idea of autonomy – that a practical principle is normative for an agent in virtue of being self-generated – seems in fact to be susceptible to just the two major directions of development that are discernible in Fichte's *Sittenlehre*. Both posit a constitutive relation between the principle and the agency; they differ in which element has priority. One holds the principle fixed and deems

¹⁰⁶ One incidental reason for this was the fact that Fichte's son, Immanuel Hermann Fichte, was a philosopher prominent in his own right in the 1830s and 40s. In addition to editing his father's collected works and authoring a well-regarded history of philosophy from Locke to Hegel (*Beiträge zur Charakteristik der neueren deutschen Philosophie*, 1829 and 1841) he was the editor of a widely read journal of post-Hegelian philosophy and theology (*Zeitschrift für Philosophie und spekulative Theologie*, to which Kierkegaard subscribed from its inception in 1837). But there are deeper reasons as well. After losing his post at Jena in the wake of the atheism controversy, Fichte turned to writing a series of popular works (of which the first was *The Vocation of Man*) which were very widely read and which brought his views on ethics and transcendental philosophy to a far wider audience than Kant's own – or even those of Schmid and Reinhold, Kant's more academic popularizers – were able to reach. Finally, many of Fichte's ethical ideas entered the collective consciousness via their appropriation in romanticism; it is no accident that Kierkegaard's dissertation on irony as a philosophical and ethical stance takes as its two main points of reference Socratic irony and irony "after Fichte".

¹⁰⁷ Of course Fichte himself was the foremost proponent of the idea that his philosophy was a better expression of the spirit of Kant's – purged of errors and inconsistencies Kant's critics Schulze, Maimon and Jacobi had accused him of – in virtually every respect. But he was by no means the only person to have believed this. Schelling treats Kantian and Fichtean ethics in parallel in raising the same objection (see Schelling 1927, VII 351 ff.). Hegel treated Fichte's ethics as a natural extension of Kant's in the *Moralität* section of the *Philosophy of Right*. Martensen also presented Fichte's self-conception as substantially correct (and Kant as threatened by Fichte's prominence) – see Kierkegaard 1909-1978 II C 25, vol. XII, 284 f.

whatever fails to accord with it not (genuine) action; the other holds the activity fixed and deems the principles it fails to accord with not the will's own, and so not binding on it. Each approach has characteristic problems – the latter the arbitrariness Hegel criticized in the romantics; the former the fact that it shifts the locus of agency from the individual to the principle (since it is accordance with the principle that qualifies behavior as action, or as free, or as the agent's own, depending on the formulation of the account). What both have in common is the difficulty of accounting for imputable immorality, and they have it for the same reason.

I believe the problem of the imputability of immorality is a serious one for Kantian ethics in its contemporary manifestations. It is certainly not an adequate response for Kantians to admit (as for instance Korsgaard does¹⁰⁸) that moral evil is unintelligible and leave it at that. To do so raises problems both for (backward-looking) ascriptions of blame and (forward-looking) accounts of practical deliberation. That it rules out a view of any past behaviour as both imputable and immoral seems a bad result, but those convinced that blame ascriptions have ethical interest only insofar as they inform future deliberations might be able to live with it. But it also rules out a view of any possible future actions as imputably immoral, and that is problematic. What is unintelligible in the sense at issue cannot be relevant to an agent's practical deliberation and so cannot, for example, be something she sets out to avoid.¹⁰⁹ (It will not do to reply that it is relevant to her practical deliberation because in setting out to avoid immoral behavior the agent is setting out to avoid merely behaving instead of genuinely acting.

¹⁰⁸ See Korsgaard 1996, 171 ff.

¹⁰⁹ That is, the moral evil problem is a problem even from the practical standpoint as described, for instance, by Bok (1998: chapter two). Korsgaard (1996: chapter six) accepts something like the same description (attributing it to the Kant of the *Groundwork*), but fails to see the problem that persists. Note that the complaint here is not that for something to be a norm for an agent the objective probability of the agent conforming to it must *actually* be less than one (as Lavin 2004 seems to assume in making a related criticism of Korsgaard). It is rather that nothing can function as a norm in practical deliberation for an agent who believes herself in possession of a *demonstration* that the probability of his conforming to it (or not acting at all) is one – and who therefore cannot in principle see it as something she must *try* to approximate.

That reply simply pushes the question to which the autonomy account was supposed to provide an answer (what accounts for my interest in fulfilling moral demands?) back one step (what accounts for my interest in acting rather than merely behaving?). An answer to that second question providing a parallel account (of action as a constitutive end of behavior) would come accompanied by a parallel problem (of describing possible behavior that is of practical concern to the agent and that nevertheless fails to be action). But to concede the legitimacy of leaving the second question unanswered, or of answering it in a different way, is to concede the legitimacy of those options as responses to the first question as well.)

This worry pressed by Kierkegaard is still too far from the center of contemporary debates, given how many contemporary moral theorists produce the same impression as *Postscript*'s reassuring pastor.¹¹⁰ This is one of the many areas in which the resources available in Kierkegaard's moral psychology remain largely untapped despite being highly relevant.

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¹¹⁰ Korsgaard's version of the problem has been discussed in Ginsborg 1998 and Wallace 2001; I have mentioned already that Clark 2001 argues that the view in Velleman 1996 gives rise to a similar problem. But this criticism has by no means emerged as a major problem for such accounts.

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